

## **Effective Communication, Collaborative Learning and Digital Identities in the Contemporary Small Business Entrepreneurial Environment**

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### **Online Communication and Collaborative Learning**

Whilst delivery of pockets of excellent provision in the areas of entrepreneurship education and small business management development has been evident in recent years, one can argue that the current knowledge base on entrepreneurial learning could be more effectively used to inform design and delivery of entrepreneurial learning. Traditional educational designs do not adequately reflect how entrepreneurs learn, resulting in a mismatch between learning designs and learning needs. In short, programmes for entrepreneurs do not fully recognise the different requirements of entrepreneurs from other types of learners (Pittaway, et al 2018).

The experience of working with other colleagues on creating shared objectives and topics of great interest to everyone can be seen as an invaluable experience that emphasizes the importance of concepts such as “re-contextualisation”, “interdependence”, “digital

intentionality” and “experientiality”. Even though this novelty presented difficulties in itself, mainly because we are all accustomed to close, face to face communication when working with colleagues, it can constitute a great experience with many theoretical and practical learning benefits. The online communication between employees in SMEs’ organizational settings comes natural and takes various forms, such as online peer support and sharing sources and information. There is a great intent on a vision of collaborative development of working practices by sharing information and resources with each other. Collaboration can help to utilise content from each other and synthesize new ideas and formulate new concepts much more easily. Different members of teams within SMEs bring different areas of expertise into the table and each employee has something new to learn. Tran (2013) described cooperation as underpinned by theories of “positive interdependence”; Social interdependence theory (i.e. learners had to care about the group and come to derive self identity from being a members of a group); and social theories of cognitive development, drawing on the Work of Piaget and Vygotsky, have raved about the benefits of teamwork and cooperation as a natural approach to learning, integrated within and attuned to the immediate cultural context of the learning process. If we applied these concepts to our case, we would have to say that forming a community of practice of practitioners interested in acquiring new skills and strands of professional knowledge generates great benefits. The sharing of common goals and

vision can establish a common language and a compelling vision that determines action. It can be said that working together would benefit immensely by learning from each other. This developing theoretical construct of professional achievement in SMEs based on collaboration is going to be pivotal in the building of new innovative approaches based on constructivist, collaborative theories of learning.

### **Social Psychology and Digital Identities**

Recent work in social psychology has led to the emergence of another pattern of thought concerning identity: that of “digital” identities. This recognises the central place of digital interaction and co-creation in the process of identity formation. Through their creative and continuous re-appropriation by individual actors co-authoring experience in interactional settings, digital stories constitute the avenue for the creation, maintenance but also for the contestation and continuous change of collective identity. Central to this theorisation of digital interaction is the concept of “emplotment”, which refers to the kind of multi-layered identity work individuals engage in order to create stories of self-identification and connect diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes (Polkinghorne, 1991).

Drawing on this theory of digital identity, it can be said that co-working on a common project is a much more dynamic and multifarious experience than working in isolation.

It can be said that this is like a living organism, keeps changing and evolving, each creative instance and interaction between employees would add another layer of meaning to the shared project and would inform team’s collective response to any issue relevant to the shared project. That is changing own individual perspectives and mindsets and offers to the world a much more agile and flexible interpretation of the world. Employees are becoming a lot more adaptive to external factors.

An interesting point in employee collaboration is our evolving ability to coordinate what can be seen for many of us complex semiotic activities which are based on essential forms of shared intentionality such as anticipating and reading the intentions of others in taking up work and completing tasks before a set deadline, emotional interaction with all group members, division of roles and responsibilities, planning and implementing work. “Digital experientiality” is a central concept in educational science. Fludernik (1996, p.30) goes as far as to proclaim that a digital resource without “experientiality” -the emotively and evaluatively configured collective consciousness, collective teacher collaboration in virtual environments does not really qualify as a truly valuable learning process. This may be an overstatement, however, some degree of experientiality is necessary, after all, online collaboration is implicated in what is called the “experiential background” of recipients (Caracciolo 2014, p. 55–71). This enables participants in this working together experiment to take a step back and reflect on their

experiences, values and presumptions and how these affect their interaction with other members of the team, their creativity, their venturing with different concepts and digital tools. Narratives bring into the open rich, detailed and often personal as well as shared storytelling perspectives. This social constructionist notion that digital resources are part of the constitution of the social, cultural, and political world (Bruner 1991; Gergen and Gergen 1993).

Social transactions take place in and across various interactional contexts both formal and informal, which constitute our social microcosm. These are effective for the purpose of communication in joint projects but could have been more interactive and create even more exciting affordances for content creation. What is more, these social transactions develop in a joint product of personal, interpersonal, and cultural values, which jointly contour what counts as valuable professional knowledge amongst the members of the team about the value, the process and format of reflective writing.

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